



Neighborhood Identity: Creating Core Messages and Reinforcing Them With Activities and Communication

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Neighborhoods that have had a poor or declining image are often pulled into a cycle of reinforcing their negative image by only talking about the problems the neighborhood has and how neighbors or nonprofits are working on fixing them or how someone else should be fixing them. If you are trying to stabilize the neighborhood and rebuild its market, you must resist the temptation to fight these battles on the proverbial front page of the newspaper. You can still fight them, but the images you project about life in the neighborhood needs to be spun more positively if you want anyone to feel good about living there, investing there, or moving there.

Think of image building as a monthly campaign in which you are working to dilute and replace negative stories about the neighborhood with positive

ones. You can do this with press releases and other news generation to the news media, through what you say on your website, e-newsletter or print newsletter, and through small and large-scale activities and programs you organize.

The first step is to decide what you want the image of the neighborhood to be. It isn't enough to think about what you don't want it to be. What are the first three things you want someone to think when they hear the name of your neighborhood? Make those the three core messages you communicate in every newsletter and other communication piece you do, as well as in every activity or program you do. Here are some examples of core messages and the kind of news and activities that will reinforce those messages.

Core Message	News and Activities to Reinforce That Message
A Great Place to Live	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Photos and stories on parks and recreation ▪ Amenities of any kind: restaurants, rivers, movie theaters, employers, etc. ▪ Profile of new homebuyers and why they love the neighborhood ▪ “Why I Love [neighborhood]” stories from existing residents ▪ Youth activities ▪ Positive stories about schools ▪ Attractive entryway signage and lots of flowers ▪ Neighborhood festivals or parades ▪ Neighborhood banners/flags for houses
Friendly Neighbors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Good Neighbor Awards ▪ Block parties and other social events or clubs ▪ “Meet Your Neighbor” stories ▪ Block clubs and neighborhood associations ▪ Youth activities led by neighbors ▪ Artwalks or PorchFests featuring neighborhood artists or musicians ▪ Block improvement projects ▪ Pie-Baking Contests
Beautiful Homes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Photos and listings of attractive homes for sale ▪ “Best House on the Block” contests ▪ “Yard of the Month” contests ▪ “Most Improved Porch” contests ▪ Free architectural/design services for house makeovers ▪ Rehab loans and grants with curb appeal features ▪ Development of new high-quality homes for sale and rent ▪ Historic or other home tours ▪ Home improvement workshops
Green	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Parks, recreation trails ▪ Vacant lot improvement programs ▪ Landscaping workshops and incentives ▪ Energy efficiency rehab loans and grants ▪ Energy efficiency workshops ▪ Bicycling clubs for kids and adults ▪ Other outdoor activities ▪ Farmers’ Markets ▪ Community gardens and urban farms ▪ Public transportation stories

Core Message	News and Activities to Reinforce That Message
Safe	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Feature story on community police officers ▪ Police department youth activities ▪ National Night Out events ▪ All “Friendly Neighbors” news and activities ▪ Neighborhood cleanups ▪ Youth activities ▪ Community dog walks ▪ Neighborhood activities in parks and other public areas

You may have to work on “reframing” some of your activities and programs to make sure they are reinforcing your core messages. You can still get the same things done, it’s just a matter of how you get them done or how you talk about them. I find it helpful to always imagine a potential homebuyer as my audience – they are the most risk-averse of any audience, so if you make sure something puts the neighborhood’s best foot forward to them, you can generally assume it will do the same for existing residents, Realtors, business owners, landlords and others.

For example, would you rather buy a house in a neighborhood that....

Just picketed a drug dealer out of the neighborhood?	-or-	Held a series of children’s events that just happened to be in front of the drug dealer’s house, driving his customers away and making him move?
Offers a basic home repair program?	-or-	Offers a Home Makeover program with free interior design landscaping consultation?
Enforces city building code?	-or-	Puts on an annual Best House on the Block contest, with an awards dinner with winners in categories including owners, landlords, businesses, and more?
Has an active crime watch program?	-or-	Puts on an annual National Night Out celebration with fun activities for everyone?
Is in the news for being a food desert?	-or-	Organized a Farmers’ Market, which is held every Saturday in the school parking lot, has a community garden, or an urban farm?

Features a “Landlord Hall of Shame” in every newsletter?	-or-	Features a “Landlord Hall of <i>Fame</i> ” in every newsletter, and offers landlord training and rental rehab loans?
Demolished 25 vacant, abandoned houses?	-or-	Offers a vacant lot acquisition and improvement program so that neighbors have bigger yards, pocket parks and community gardens?
Has houses that are really cheap for low-income people willing to jump through a bunch of hoops?	-or-	Has beautiful homes with buyer credits of up to \$25,000 for qualified households – limited time only! And a free washer and dryer to our first ten closings!
Has old houses that need lots of repair and maintenance?	-or-	Has an annual historic home tour, and special financing for reimagining the classic bungalow home for today’s lifestyle?

You get the idea. When we talk about our neighborhoods and our work, we are making an impression. It is very important to be intentional about that impression and to shape it to the image we want.

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